



Access to Town Meeting Committee Recommendations

Executive Summary

The Access to Town Meeting (ATM) Committee was established by the Select Board in September 2021 and presented with a Charter to investigate, research and recommend what actions the Town can take to encourage attendance and increase participation at Town Meeting. An ATM Committee Update and the process followed by the Committee were shared as background with the Select Board during a February 22, 2022 meeting.

The Committee solicited input from the Community via a Westford Community Survey resulting in over 800 responses, and also received input to a Town Questionnaire from over 40 towns in MA via the Mass. Moderators' Association. In some cases, interviews with other Town officials were conducted for a more in-depth discussion of their Town Meeting practices and experiences. Input was compiled, analyzed, and recommendations were made.

The input provided identifies those recommendations made for consideration for the June 2022 ATM, and primarily but not exclusively fall into several categories: i.e. making ATM meetings more efficient and predictable, broaden and implement consistent communication, and increase publicity and education. Longer term and more complex recommendations are being investigated by the Remote Participation Workgroup with plans for a future report out for those results.

The H, M, L Priority designations in this document are based on a Committee consensus of the impact that recommendation would actually have on substantially increasing attendance. Individually, these recommendations may be viewed as basic, but cumulatively can greatly contribute toward improving residents' knowledge and demonstrating that the voices of the Survey respondents are being heard.

Access to Town Meeting Committee Recommendations to Select Board - April 2022

Definition of Acronyms Used: COA (Council on Aging); FB (Facebook); LWV (League of Women Voters); OTM (Open Town Meeting); TM (Town Meeting); TOW (Town of Westford); WA (Westford Academy); WPS (Westford Public Schools)

Goal: Make meeting shorter, more efficient, and predictable

Priority	Recommendation	Notes
1 H	Utilize electronic clickers for voting	Would make counted votes quicker and offers voter privacy; Also helps newcomers comfort level
2 L	Re-educate/enforce time limit on presentations	Continue to enforce existing practice of 6 minutes
3 H	Enforce a 2 minute time limit on question/comments	"At the Moderator's discretion"; can increase or decrease as necessary based on discussion. Two minute mark is used in other towns.
4 L	Display a countdown clock	To ensure both presenters and attendees keep to their allotted time limits.
5 M	Hang sign on microphone with etiquette reminders	Suggestions: "State name/address. Address the Moderator for questions. Limit comments to new material. Explain any acronyms. Allow new commenters before speaking a second time."
6 M	Move all non-voting items (awards/recognitions) outside of meeting business	Could be before Call to Order, or during lunch. Memorial/award montages can be pre-recorded and shared (TOW site, social media, WestfordCAT).
7 M	Continue recent earlier start time of 9:00-9:30am	Start earlier to end earlier.
8 H	Use consent agenda to group routine articles	Need to *clearly* mark which articles are included, and explain consent agenda procedure (how to place a hold)
9 H	Move items with high known public interest to beginning of meeting	Recent examples include Drew Farms, drive throughs, teacher override, asphalt plant. Need to widely communicate the order in publicity efforts. Some voters want to attend only for certain articles.
10 L	Determine method to track progress of meeting to interested community members	An opt-in NotifyMe text and/or Twitter widget on town website could help announce the start of a new article for voters who want to track the progress of the warrant.

Goal: Mitigate common barriers to attendance

Priority	Recommendation	Notes
11 M	Improve external communications from within Town Meeting, i.e. WiFi/cell	Many residents expressed concerns over not being able to contact children or others while at Town Meeting due to weak cell signals.
12 H	Continue to have food options available	Lunch food trucks were well received. Expand to include breakfast/coffee.
13 M	Create and publicize a family-friendly seating area	Where parents can sit with their children, if they choose. Could be in back of WA field with blankets and teen volunteers (if possible) or Abbot cafe with broadcast to watch and ability to vote. Not formal drop-off childcare.
14 H	Continue to have transportation available.	Can promote in TM reminders. Consider a promotional magnet on the van.
15 M	Provide method for advance requests of special accommodations, ie mobility, hearing, sight concerns, etc	
16 M	Encourage all town departments and local organizations/groups to avoid scheduling activities on Town Meeting dates	The resident survey cited schedule conflicts as a barrier to attendance.

Goal: Optimize general town communications

Priority	Recommendation	Notes
17 H	Streamline all TOW communication channels by updating, centralizing and publicizing options to broaden audience	Including but not limited to official social media channels, Smart 911, Town Notices, NotifyMe texts, Town Manager Newsletter. Currently scattered throughout the TOW site. Residents may not be aware of all methods, when they are used and which may require sign-up/opt-in. Resident survey showed a need for town communications to reach residents who don't attend TM. [Example: North Andover page]
18 H	Centralize all Town Meeting information to create a landing page on the Town website to make it more user-friendly, easier to find and engaging	There are at least 4 places where Town Meeting information can be found: Town Meeting page, Town Moderator page, Document Center, and Budget documents. Could use Town Meeting page to link to other areas and list all other applicable information. Use more graphics and divide information into sections (perhaps using icon links) to make it more user friendly.
19 M	Update the Welcome to Westford pdf to add information regarding Open Town Meeting	The Welcome to Westford pdf (LINK) is out of date in many areas, but it also does not even mention that we are an Open Town Meeting form of government and point the new resident to more information.
20 L	Create 1-pager about OTM to include in resident mailings	Ex: Historical Commission's new resident welcome note, car excise tax

Goal: Educate residents about Town Meeting			
Priority		Recommendation	Notes
21	H	Announce the Town Meeting date when set and with frequent reminders through all TOW communication channels	A FB "event" could also be created. All reminders should be engaging, using pictures and/or graphics, not just text (this is good practice for all general posts on social media channels). Also consider a Reverse911 call closer to the date. [Example: Shrewsbury]
22	H	Transition the management responsibility of the Town Meeting banner from LWV to Town per their request	Resident survey identified a need to reach residents who are not on social media or follow town communications.
23	M	Publicize using a 1-page eye-catching "event" flyer hanging in community locations	Resident survey identified a need to reach residents who are not on social media or follow town communications. Flyer could be posted in coffee shops, stores and other community locations in weeks leading up to TM.
24	M	Utilize Town Meeting "mentor" volunteers as a resource during the meeting	Easily identifiable, wearing buttons "Ask Me About Town Meeting" and in clearly marked seats so hesitant/curious attendees could sit adjacent and ask questions. Advertise this service on Town Meeting website.
25	L	Encourage article presentations to be pre-recorded with closed captions at WestfordCAT.	Video would be used in publicity/promotion, and could possibly be played at TM in place of live presentation to address hearing-impaired concerns. Would not work for WA Field. Include on updated Town Meeting website.
26	H	Share easy-to-understand and eye-catching information on the content of each warrant article through all TOW communication channels	Could start roughly 2 weeks before TM with 1 article/day with a brief description. Could also link to the video created, if applicable. Strongly encourage the use of "layman's terms" and explain any acronyms. FB posts should be shared to local FB groups to broaden reach.
27	M	Assign a clear point of contact for each warrant article for residents to send questions ahead of Town Meeting	Increases confidence for voters. Publicize this information on Town Meeting website.
28	M	Utilize school communications for Town Meeting reminders	School/district communications could include a brief TM reminder in principal emails and district Billboard post. Perhaps send half-page flyer home with students. Need permission/coordination with Superintendent.
29	M	Utilize existing town department/partners communication methods for Town Meeting reminders	Disseminate TM reminders through newsletters from Library, Cameron/COA, Roudenbush, Westford CAT
30	L	Publish Town Meeting reminder in other mailings, like Westford Neighbors magazine and Action Unlimited	Could leverage existing content, like a write-up with brief explanation of the articles, and/or a graphic "ad/flyer"

Longer-term recommendations			
Priority		Recommendation	Notes
31	TBD	Arrange a licensed provider for formal childcare	Would occur in separate room/location. Steadily offering it will build trust.
32	TBD	Develop a library of instructional Town Meeting Videos	General videos on the Open Town Meeting - procedures, process, definitions of various terms, mock OTM showing examples of "moving the question", asking a question, making an amendment, etc. Good idea for a Senior Capstone.
33	TBD	Create Adult Education classes on Open Town Meeting	Would benefit any resident unfamiliar with OTM government
34	TBD	Add civics lessons to WPS curriculum at various grade levels as appropriate, with specific mentions on Westford Open Town Meeting (OTM) form of government	Many people do not seem to know or understand the process of local government. Now that civics is back in the public school curriculum, this would be the perfect opportunity to educate Westford students on our local form of government.